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# **Teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of commercialisation in Australian public schools**

## **Introduction**

This paper reports teacher and school leader perceptions of commercialisation in Australian public schools using data generated by an open-ended survey question asking about the effects of commercialisation. As school systems have become increasingly complex, there is urgent need for research that investigates the affordances and challenges of technological change, the emergence of a global education policy landscape and the ongoing effects of the restructuring of the state. These forces are becoming integrated with the traditional aspirations and functions of public schooling, calling into question 'neat' definitions of and distinctions between public and private education that have underpinned common understandings of the school sector. The political and economic context that public schools now operate in, which involves devolution and the outsourcing of many services previously provided by public entities, public-private partnerships in domains such as building schools, and the opportunities that increasing standardisation, accountability and competition create for private interests, exemplify this complex relationship between public and private spheres. Indeed, in Australia, which serves as the specific context for this paper, Lingard and Sellar (2013) have argued that a 'national system of schooling' has emerged that contributes to the growth of new public-private partnerships, the outsourcing of support and services, the commercialisation of various educational practices, and the use of data to 'govern' schools and school systems more efficiently. This has created and enfranchised new players and actors in national and global education industries.

While there has been much debate about the privatisation of education in the form of alternative models of school provision, such as academies and charter schools, the increased prevalence of commercialisation in public schooling has attracted less scrutiny (Verger et al.

2016). We define commercialisation, for the purposes of this paper, as the creation, marketing and sale of education goods and services to schools by for-profit providers (Hogan & Thompson 2017). Our specific focus is on commercialisation in public schools, which are funded and administered by Federal, State and Territory governments and are provided for the benefit of all citizens. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, public education in Australia has been conceived as compulsory, free, and secular (Meadmore 2001; Reid 2017). Across the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century schools have had to increasingly pursue additional sources of funding beyond those provided by the state, including from parents, and this has challenged the ideal of ‘free’ public education, while the growth of denominational non-government schools and changed legislation governing the school leaving age have also helped to rework these ideals in recent decades (Meadmore 2001). Moreover, most private schools in Australia that are operated by religious or other non-government organisations also receive state funding, largely from the federal government. The distinction between public and private education is thus not clear cut, but the latter generally still fail to meet at least one of the criteria of being free (or at least charging only nominal fees), universal and secular.

Commercialisation generates a number of conceptual and practical challenges for public schooling. First, commercialisation is placing pressure on the concept of the ‘public’, because the growth of commercial involvement in public schools blurs the line between the roles, relationships and purposes of public and private organisations that are involved in schooling. Second, there has been little research on the effects of commercialisation on the core work of public schools and subsequently little understanding of the ‘effects’ of commercialisation. As Ball reminds us, the impact of policy that facilitates commercialisation often manifests through first order effects such as “changes in practice or structure” and second order effects such as “the impact of these changes on patterns of social access [and] opportunity” (1994 pp. 25-26).

In what follows, we first elaborate our theoretical framework for understanding the rise of commercialisation in Australian public schools. We suggest that changing governance structures, framed by principles of marketisation, have meant that public institutions, such as schools, are being increasingly opened to commercial products and services. We then provide an account and analysis of Australian teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of the role of education businesses, consultants and corporations in schools. Our analysis suggests that commercialisation is prevalent in Australian public education, and teachers and school leaders give voice to various benefits and problems associated with this phenomenon.

### **Theorising commercialisation in public schooling**

Since the 1980s, governments have been reconfiguring the management of public institutions and services in line with principles of economic rationalism (Pusey 1991). This is evident in the rise of public-private partnerships (PPPs) and the promotion of structures and policies that privilege choice, competition, markets and accountability (Marginson 1997). Schools have not been immune to this shift and, as Ball (2009) observes, national curriculum, national standards, performance indicators, benchmarking and targets are reshaping schooling processes into a set of standardised and measurable products and practices with the intention of improving performance outcomes and profitability. Schools now adopt generic management systems and a standardised culture to deliver improvements in efficiency and effectiveness.

In Australia, the election of the Rudd Labor Government in 2007 saw a series of national policy interventions that were implemented by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). ACARA is a statutory authority responsible for the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the mandated Australian Curriculum. AITSL is a private

company whose only shareholder is the Federal Minister for Education and is responsible for mandated teacher standards and the accreditation of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs. These organisations are pillars of a more standardised national system of schooling that provides new opportunities for commercial actors.

As Burch (2009) suggests, the creation of standardised national school systems increases opportunities for private providers to become major suppliers to schools across local education markets. Commercial providers can offer ready-made ‘solutions’ to various educational ‘problems’ at large and thus more profitable scales (Ball 2012). As Burch (2009) notes, these services complement and supplement basic education functions, often in a context where bureaucratic or central support is being withdrawn. These services often include the provision of curriculum content, assessment services, data infrastructures, digital learning, remedial instruction, professional development for staff and administrative support. In our view, the important distinction between commercialisation and privatisation is that commercialisation involves providers working with, and within, public schools to provide and support educational processes, rather than establishing and managing independent schools (e.g. private school models such as low-fee for-profit schools in the global south, charter schools in the US, academies in the UK or free schools in Sweden). Thus, in commercialised school systems some public monies are ultimately used to fund commercial activity in schools. Yet, as Burch (2009) highlights, this activity often remains invisible because commercialisation has crept into schools as a seemingly necessary way to deliver education. Despite the relative opacity of commercialisation, Burch shows that schools in the US alone are spending approximately \$48 billion annually to purchase products and services from the private sector. The multiple profit opportunities that now exist in schooling and education more broadly have helped to birth a ‘global education industry’ that is already worth more than \$4 trillion annually (Verger et al. 2016).

Commercialisation is clearly big business, but it is worth noting that it has had a long (and relatively uncontroversial) history in schools, as evidenced by the use of commercially produced textbooks in classrooms since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Callahan 1964). Schools have also tended to involve the private sector for the provision of transportation services, food supply and specialised instruction and facilities (Burch 2009). However, since the 1990s there has been growing interest in, and concern about, the scale and scope of such commercialisation. One such concern has been the positioning of students as consumers (Abrams 2016; Kenway & Bullen 2011; Molnar 2007), prompted by initiatives like the launch of ‘Channel One’ in the US in 1989. By 1999, Channel One had 8 million students tuned in every morning for a 12 minute news program, which incorporated 2 minutes of commercial advertising by the likes of Snickers, Pepsi, Mountain Dew, Nintendo, Xbox, Nike, Pizza Hut and McDonald’s (Molnar 2007). Channel One provided schools with TVs, videocassette recorders and satellite dishes, an outlay exceeding \$250 million, however the 30 second advertising spots sold for \$200,000 and generated over \$100 million per year in revenue (Abrams 2016). This example shows the importance of curriculum standardisation within and across systems for creating ‘economies of scale’ that enable products and services to be developed and disseminated nationally and, in some instances, internationally.

The extent of the commercialisation of teaching and learning processes is often hidden because there is little empirical research on commercialisation in schools. One emerging line of inquiry has been focused on large international corporations such as Pearson (Hogan, Sellar, & Lingard 2016; Riep 2017). Pearson has a significant involvement in the production of standardised tests in national and provincial systems and the development of textbooks and materials that help students to perform better on these tests. They also have a global monopoly on this market (albeit one that appears increasingly vulnerable), which enables them to sell these products at scale with little variation for individual contexts (Hogan 2016). These large international

corporations have been criticised for contributing to the standardisation of teaching and learning through lobbying and influencing government policymakers to create favourable conditions for commercial expansion (Reckhow 2013). Burch (2009) argues that these favourable conditions align with global education policy reforms based on standardisation of curriculum and assessment, allowing key test-delivery suppliers, standards alignment providers and psychometric evaluators such as Pearson, Harcourt Education, Kaplan, McGraw-Hill and Houghton Mifflin to increase their markets and influence.

## **Methods**

Data for this paper was collected as part of a survey of Australian teachers and school leaders. All participants were current members of the Australian Education Union (AEU) and/or AEU-affiliated organisations<sup>1</sup> that represent teachers and principals working in Australian public schools. The study was commissioned by the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) to chart the extent, and perceptions, of commercialisation in public education (Lingard, Sellar, Hogan, & Thompson 2017). The aims of the survey were to (a) identify how education professionals affiliated with the AEU across Australia perceive the commercialisation of public education in Australia; (b) gather evidence of the types of activities that commercial actors are undertaking in Australian public schools; and (c) gather evidence regarding the concerns that education professionals affiliated with the AEU have about commercial actors in public education. An online survey was considered the appropriate instrument to generate preliminary evidence. This survey asked questions about the perceived range and frequency of commercial activity in participants' schools in the preceding 12 months. Participants were also asked questions about the level of concern they had regarding commercialisation in Australian public

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<sup>1</sup> The AEU affiliated State unions include, Queensland Teachers Union, New South Wales Teachers Federation, State School Teachers Union of Western Australia as well as the AEU Australia Capital Territory Branch, South Australian Branch, Tasmanian Branch and Northern Territory Branch.

schools. The research team constructed the survey instrument. An initial draft underwent cognitive piloting with an invited group of NSWTF educators (n=16). The draft survey was revised accordingly, with a number of questions being removed or rewritten in order to improve validity.

### *Sample*

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, a volunteer sample was recruited via email by state AEU branches or AEU affiliates, as well as through social media accounts and requests to pass the invitation along to other members (snowball sampling). There were 2193 members of the Australian Education Union who completed the survey.

#### [Table 1 - Participant Demographics]

At the end of the survey, participants had the opportunity to voluntarily complete an extended answer question asking: ‘Do you have any other opinions and concerns about the role of education businesses, consultants and corporations in public schools?’ There were 713 participants who provided responses to this question<sup>2</sup>. As Table 2 shows, the majority of the respondents were from NSW (53.6%) and Qld (25.9%) respectively. 54.6% of respondents worked in urban communities, while other participants worked in regional centres (24.1%) and rural (18.1%) and remote (3.2%) communities. Respondents identified the socioeconomic status of their school communities as very advantaged/advantaged (20.2%), average (33.8%) and disadvantaged/very disadvantaged (46%). The majority of teachers (including, Classroom/subject teacher, Head of Learning Area, Student Support Teacher, Teacher-Librarian, Primary School Subject Specialist/Coordinator and Other) worked in primary

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<sup>2</sup> There were 29 responses that answered ‘No’ or ‘N/A’. These were not included in the analysis.



schools (42.6%) and high schools (41.5%). 57.9% were classroom teachers, while Principals and Deputy/Assistant Principals made up 7.3% and 7.4% of the respondents respectively.

[Table 2 – Participant Demographics of extended response]

### ***Analysis***

Data were analysed using constant comparison and analytic induction techniques to identify common codes across participants' responses (LeCompte & Preissle 1993). Table 3 presents an overview of the data themes and sub-themes. Using a protocol developed to present the thematic analysis of large numbers of responses to open-ended questions in surveys (Thompson 2014), the analysis breaks down each answer into a number of identifiable 'nodes'. These were then entered into NVivo software and one author worked independently to develop a list of initial codes. Initial codes were then reviewed, classified and compared to data with another member of the research team acting as a peer reviewer. Through this negotiation process the multiple codes were organised into themes and sub-themes. Because each answer is broken into nodes, it is important to note that the 713 respondents produced 1801 nodes (an average of 2.5 per respondent). Sub-themes are thus shown in the table as frequencies, while the themes have been shown as an overall percentage, which reflects the number of nodes in a theme, compared with the overall nodes that were coded (Thompson 2014).

### **Results**

It is not possible to report in detail the responses to each sub-theme here; however, each of the general themes is reported to provide context for understanding respondents' perceptions of commercialisation in Australian schools. We summarise below the broad nature of the open-ended responses.

- 38% of responses argued that Australian public schools have adopted the logics of business management, offering both affordances and challenges to the day-to-day practices of schools.
- 38% of responses argued that there are benefits to commercialisation, particularly in terms of the provision of resources that support teaching and learning.
- 59% of responses expressed concern about increasing commercialisation and generally called for increased quality control and tighter regulation of the commercial products and services bought by public schools.
- 43% of responses argued that commercialisation was having an impact on teachers' work and wellbeing, as well as on curriculum, pedagogy and student achievement.
- 40% of responses expressed concerns about the conduct of the Federal and State governments and Education Departments in developing and enacting effective public education policy.
- 3% of responses did not express views relevant to the question posed.

[Table 3 - Themes and sub-themes]

### ***Schools as businesses***

38% of responses identified that Australian public schools have adopted the logics of business management, providing both challenges and opportunities for the operation of schools, the types of interactions schools and teachers now have with parents and students, and the relationships that schools now cultivate with private sector organisations. School leaders commonly referred to the need to run schools more like businesses and to ensure that they were budgeting effectively, maintaining a competitive advantage and improving student outcomes:

We must compete with our neighbouring schools. We must market ourselves in order to attract potential clients. We identify our unique selling points. We upsell our curriculum offerings. We mine our data. We talk about performance-based pay. We set teachers up to be rivals in the marketplace. We must meet targets. We measure ourselves according to indicators, milestones, or performance criteria. We are managers, administrators, marketing professionals, financial experts and IT trouble-shooters. Public schools have been forced to become more like businesses.

Teacher respondents identified the shift to business management styles as problematic because they felt school leaders were working to change the purposes of schooling. As one person argued, “Principals and senior staff now commonly use managerial language and the jargon associated with business and the market. We are regularly told that parents are 'shopping around' and that we need to be an attractive product!” Similarly, another respondent commented, “The language during staff meetings is less about nurturing and educating students who attend a given school and more about managing the school and raising student performance or 'productivity’”.

Respondents frequently described their concerns that public schools shift the costs of commercialisation to parents, with subsequent effects on teacher-parent relationships, pedagogy and equity. As one teacher explained, families are frequently asked to subsidise many of the commercial products and services being purchased by schools and teachers. Teachers are now expected to “chase money” from parents, “which not only consumes time but also potentially damages relationships with parents”. Another respondent suggested that asking parents to subsidise or purchase commercial products (e.g. laptops and iPads) has meant that teachers feel pressure to use them in their classrooms regardless of whether they are pedagogically necessary. Asking parents to pay for these products and services can thus affect curriculum planning, as one respondent explained:

As a principal I am concerned about the trend to 'outsource' many of the responsibilities traditionally taken on and managed by schools. Specialist subjects and companies now compete to provide schools with creative arts/sports/technology opportunities. Families are asked to subsidise many of these 'purchased' products. Teachers were traditionally trained to be 'generalists' with a broad range of skills and curriculum knowledge - now it seems the trend is to buy experiences for students - with little evidence they make any difference to a child's educational experience.

There are also significant equity issues because children may be excluded from classroom experiences if their parents choose not to, or cannot afford to, pay:

At our school this has been translated as providing access to programs like Sunshine Online, Reading Eggs and Mathletics... At our school parents are asked to pay for their subscription to these programs. Where parents are unable or unwilling to pay, their child cannot use the program. Therefore, within classrooms there are some students who can use the programs and others who cannot.

Even though there are clearly significant equity issues here, it seems that it is becoming common for Australian public schools to transfer costs of commercialisation to parents.

Interestingly, while some teachers and school leaders argued that sponsorship and advertising could play a positive role in financing schools the majority of respondents disagreed. Those who supported school sponsorship did so with the rationale that it was necessary to supplement their limited school budgets, particularly in terms of ICT and sports equipment resourcing: "I'd encourage more corporate sponsorship to provide equipment. Our students are very poor and they have very little access to technology. Corporate sponsorship would be an effective way to get computers into our classrooms". Others, however, expressed frustration and/or concern at having to rely on commercial or philanthropic funding sources like the large Australian

supermarket chain, Woolworths, for adequate support. Some respondents questioned what the ‘price’ of school sponsorship might be, for example where “sponsorship by a fast food company is in conflict with the teaching of healthy nutritional habits”. The argument that public schools should be free of corporate philanthropy was made frequently, including one respondent who explained that their school had turned down the offer to be sponsored by McDonald’s:

The idea was put to the school community that the local [McDonald's] franchise would give us a certain amount of money if we would have their logo on the school uniform! ...For such a giant organisation why not just give a donation of good will to the community they have profiteered off for so many years (and still do)? Morals, ethics, greed and scruples are all intertwined. Thank goodness the majority saw this as a very bad idea and it was not accepted.

The comment by this teacher resonates with widespread concern in the academic literature regarding philanthropic contributions to public schools. Predominantly emanating from the US, much attention has been paid to a shift in the logic of philanthropy, from a notion of social obligation where funders have no control over how donations could or should be used, to a more interventionist social investment model where funders maintain influence over their contributions (Saltman 2010) and often direct these to influence policies and practices (Au & Ferrare 2014; Lipman 2015; Reckhow 2013). A key factor driving the management of schools is now a perceived lack of public funding, and school leaders are attempting to fill this void through parental contributions and philanthropy of various kinds. Principals in Australian public schools have, at least in part, become middle managers working to balance multiple demands to ensure that their school functions effectively within a market-oriented, competitive environment (see Goldring & Schuermann 2009; Thompson & Mockler 2016; Rousmaniere 2013).

### ***Benefits of commercialisation***

An important theme that emerged from the open responses was that there could be benefits to the use of commercial products and services in schools. In particular, teachers felt that some commercial resources were necessary for their day-to-day practices. Respondents reported that commercial products can help “time poor” teachers design “high quality learning experiences” and assist to “differentiate learning” for their students. One participant argued that when “commercial businesses provide high quality, well written and presented products that abide by teaching guidelines these are not a problem” and can be “advantageous to support the delivery of curriculum based on the needs of individuals and groups within a school context”.

Moreover, when teachers lacked a particular skill or area of expertise, some respondents felt it was best to “outsource”. For example, one response indicated that their school purchased the Jellybeans music program because their teachers “do not have the skillset, equipment or musical expertise to implement this learning area”. Over 25% of survey responses felt that commercial products help “provide teachers with a wide range of resources to support a well-structured learning program”.

Many responses also included a warning or caveat regarding the usefulness of commercial resources, suggesting that a “lazy approach to teaching” can emerge from a “one size fits all approach where the textbook (or resource) becomes the curriculum”. Others noted that while commercial companies can provide resources at a “reasonable price”, not all schools can afford to purchase this type of support and thus the “gap between the haves and have nots continues to grow”. Similarly, there was some apprehension about the “hidden agendas” of commercial organisations and how they might be “driving curriculum and assessment to take over publicly devised aspects of education” on a for-profit basis. For example, one respondent explained that “commercial producers have a place in the resource market for teachers but must never be

considered as a substitute for quality teaching - this is what we are trained to do and we must remain the experts in this regard”.

When we consider how the ICT and Education Technology industry interacts with schools the increasing intensity of commercialisation becomes even clearer. Many respondents argued that ICT and technology solutions, including attendance and timetabling software, as well as programs that assist in the recording, analysis and reporting of student assessment, were often considered necessary to purchase from the private sector, because teachers, school leaders and Education Departments generally do not have the skills or expertise to develop these services and programs themselves. For example, one respondent argued:

The fact that schools are increasingly seeking resources and help from businesses and corporations is a sad reflection on the Education Department. It shows that the Education Department is underfunded and there is a lack of commitment for developing quality and useful resources. A classic example is the frequent use of Sentral in public schools, which is a fantastic program. The Education Department tried to bring out their own version, using inferior software with significant bugs and issues and [still] wonder why schools choose not to use the free resources available to them, but instead pay for quality resources elsewhere.

This comparison between the Department’s “old, clunky and slow systems” and the commercial provider’s “effective, efficient and modern programs and apps that are user friendly and save staff, students and parents time” was common. Abrams argues that ‘schools can and should adopt some practices from the business world’ (p. 15): While ‘[s]ome business practices clearly serve schools well’ (p. 15), ‘distinguishing which do and which do not is critical’ (p. 16). Complex software packages, such as those used for timetabling or other administrative functions, are the kinds of product that can be better developed by IT companies.

### *Criticisms of commercialisation*

While there is qualified support for some aspects of commercialisation in Australian public schools, almost 60% of respondents argued against other aspects of commercialisation, expressing concern about the quality of commercial products and services, how these are regulated and how they contribute to the deprofessionalisation of teachers in Australia. Most commonly cited was a sense of unease when respondents felt “forced” to implement commercial programs in their classrooms to align their teaching with the broader strategic objectives of their school. One respondent explained how they voiced concerns to their principal but were ignored:

We are made to test our students on PAT-R<sup>3</sup> tests when the creators obviously have no ability to understand what is needed for students to have the best opportunity to achieve... PAT-R ignores educational research, students (even better readers) get tired and give up and guess answers half way through the tests. Yet, teachers have to collect this data, put it into One-School and we are asked why our data is not improving. When PAT-R was first introduced, I voiced my concern to the principal, was thanked for my concern – nothing changed.

Similarly, other teachers highlighted how they had taken their concerns about tests that did not appropriately align with the achievement standards of the Australian Curriculum to the commercial provider directly, only to be dismissed. One noted: “I feel these publishers, as multi-national companies, show little regard for producing quality materials that relate to the

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<sup>3</sup> PAT-R refers to the ‘Progressive Achievement Tests in Reading’ sold by the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER). ACER offers Progressive Achievement Tests for Mathematics, Reading, Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar and Science. ACER states that these ‘series of tests are designed to provide objective, norm-referenced information to teachers about their students’ skills and understandings in a range of key areas’ and that ‘more than 2.5 million Progressive Achievement Tests are delivered online every year’. (<https://www.acer.org/pat>)



Australian Curriculum and simply provide a generic product composed from materials prepared for education systems in other countries”.

A number of respondents expressed frustration about the way that commercial providers advertise their products to schools and teachers. A common complaint was the “endless emails” teachers and principals receive on a daily basis. As one respondent noted: “My inbox is full of offers from publishing companies and requests for meetings to showcase new products. Publishing companies are almost harassing in their contact, ringing at 9am and expecting to talk with teachers immediately”. Commercial providers employ sophisticated marketing campaigns and lobbying strategies to ensure their products and services are taken up by governments, systems and individual schools and teachers (see Au & Ferrare 2014; Ball 2012; Reckhow 2013; Verger et al. 2016). Some of this research also suggests that the products pushed into schools have little connection to curriculum and may not improve student outcomes. Some respondents, particularly those working in learning areas such as Music, Drama, the Arts and Health and Physical Education, expressed long-term concern for their students, their subjects and their future job prospects:

As a PDHPE teacher in a NSW primary school I am very concerned about PE and sport being outsourced to private companies who are often less qualified than PDHPE teachers but may bring flashy equipment. It not only makes redundant highly trained teachers who know their students well and can develop a school specific program following through from year to year, but it also de-skills classroom teachers by abdicating their responsibility for PE and sport.

As this teacher argues, commercialisation has been taken up readily in certain areas because school leaders and teachers have been encouraged to view the issue in economic terms such as time saved and value added (Powell 2015). The obvious concern here is not only the deprofessionalisation of teachers and the questionable learning outcomes for students, but the

potential for commercialisation to undermine schools as equitable public institutions, positioning them instead as centres of investment for private interests (Ball 2012; Kenway, Bigum & Fitzclarence 2006; Molnar 2007).

While some respondents thought it was useful – even necessary – to have commercial support, 15% of respondents said that commercialisation has absolutely no role to play in public schools. A majority of these responses cited concerns about the for-profit agenda of commercial providers, arguing that “economic rationalism undermines the egalitarian basis of our public education system” and unduly influences government policy and thus, the development of students into “well-rounded citizens”. Others referred to a free, high-quality public education system as a principle of democracy and a basic human right. One respondent summarised this view: “Education has the potential to be an extraordinarily profitable 'business' BUT public education should never be for profit”. These responses do raise questions about the place of commercialisation in public schools, how it is regulated and its potential impact on the purposes of ‘public education’.

### ***Impact on teaching***

Respondents described how commercial products impact on their work as teachers, including effects on assessment, curriculum, professional learning, and the personal and professional wellbeing of teachers. Out of the 43% of responses that discussed how commercialisation impacted on teaching there was a general consensus that the nature of teachers’ work had changed, largely due to the emphasis now placed on data from standardised testing in Australia. As one teacher suggested, the emphasis on results coupled with the lack of trust placed in teacher judgement of student achievement has created a space in which commercial providers can prosper. For example, teachers are being made to use particular testing products

in their classrooms to prepare students for NAPLAN (e.g. PAT-R and PAT-M tests), and are also using particular textbooks because “buying Pearson textbooks... [will] help the students do well on Pearson designed tests”. Many respondents consider the over-emphasis on NAPLAN to create an “overreliance on data” that is “killing education” with many feeling like they are “teaching to the test” and sacrificing the “creativity and higher order thinking” skills of their students.

Another key concern for teachers was the quality and cost of commercial professional learning (PL). Some responses argued that commercial PL was merely “an advertisement opportunity” for commercial providers “to simply sell their product”. There was concern expressed that most commercial PL sessions were “schmick” productions, but “not as relevant as I had hoped”. Similarly, teachers and school leaders expressed concern about the cost of commercial PL opportunities, with some schools spending more than \$700 a day to release a single teacher to attend a PL seminar, while others were spending their entire budget in sending their principal to an ‘edu-guru’ conference, where presenters “often get paid \$20,000 a day!”

Particularly concerning for teachers was the move towards having to self-fund their own PL, with some commenting that they spent thousands of dollars a year of their own money on PL that they personally believed was necessary for their professional practice. To date, little research has been undertaken on the extent to which commercial providers are being used to deliver PL or the effectiveness of these programs for teacher learning and student outcomes.

Respondents pointed to the impact on teacher wellbeing of commercialisation, with a substantial number of responses suggesting that it was making them consider leaving the profession. There is a sense that the various facets of commercialisation “are creating stress and anxiety for staff, and impinging on the effectiveness of teachers to deliver quality education as a result of flagging morale”. Some respondents suggested their workload “is a health and safety issue” and they felt like “overworked machines”:

My school has already had young teachers resign because they have become disillusioned and dispirited by the hijacking of their teaching. More are planning to follow. I'm staying - because I'm old enough to remember what we've fought for and not let it slip away without speaking out.

While there may be possibilities for speaking back to commercialisation in this way, others referred to having been “harassed or bullied to submit to this new model and not voice differing opinions or ideas”. In fact, a number of responses referred to a “be silent or leave” agenda in regards to commercialisation, where “anyone who speaks up or raises issues is... branded as a whinger”. As one respondent put it, “Good teachers can't stay teaching as they care too much and are not product based”.

### ***Concerns about governments and education departments***

The final theme<sup>4</sup> reflects concern expressed by a number of respondents about the conduct of the Federal and State governments and education departments in developing and enacting effective public education policy. The general consensus was that these organisations were abdicating their responsibility to run high quality public education systems. One common claim was that education departments have removed various support services for schools and teachers:

Over my career I have been dismayed to see the abandonment of quality professional support being provided by the State education system. There has been a dearth of support provided for the introduction of the new Syllabus documents. Their introduction has been a case of "here they are, good luck". It is obvious that each

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<sup>4</sup> This excludes the comments that did not discuss any aspect of commercialisation in schools, but rather focused on issues regarding the survey itself.

individual school has been struggling to work out direction for the introduction of these documents. In my career I have never before seen so much change at once with so little support to ensure quality delivery... Earlier in my career my experiences with implementing new syllabus' were well supported by regional consultants. They were regularly in our school to ensure quality delivery and to offer expert advice and support to teachers. It has been a long time since I have received this level of support that used to be available. Schools now feel that they have to look to commercial providers to fill this gap.

This absence of departmental support has meant that schools are increasingly reliant on commercial products and services. Many argued that this constituted “the government passing the buck” because “the government has no money and no idea how to fix the system, so it has become easier to distance themselves from the problem by allowing external ‘punters’ to run the schools”. This results in governments:

Shunning their Constitutional responsibility to provide quality education to all students and means they have become more susceptible to inducements from commercial corporations to make decisions that affect all the students in their state for the simplicity of quick fixes and monetary gain with no thought for the future and what our children are or will be learning.

Indeed, a majority of responses argued that commercialising education was a political agenda and seen as an “easy solution” to the complexity of providing public education.

Some responses compared the commercialisation of Australian public schools with what has been happening in public education systems in the US and UK. There was concern that Australia might follow the US charter school or the British academies models, or even look to implement “a teacher evaluation system based on student performance”. These possibilities

were critiqued as “dangerous business” that would lead to further problems for students and teachers. There was a sense that Australia had yet to travel to an irreversible point of commercialisation (and privatisation) of schools. The privatised TAFE system was regularly employed as an exemplar of how disastrous it could be to use this model as a blueprint to privatise Australian public schools:

The continual outsourcing to private corporations demeans the professional role of teachers within our schools and ultimately leads to lack of choice and inequity of access. Just look at the mess TAFE is now in, with many teaching positions lost, courses no longer available, rising costs to students to attend and the booming private education sector that is fast becoming the only alternative in many fields of study - a national disgrace.

Indeed, many suggested that the US, UK and Australian vocational education and training systems should be employed by policymakers as learning opportunities to ensure the same mistakes were not made again. This is a particularly interesting finding given the private delivery of schools is growing around the world. Research in the US, UK, Sweden and elsewhere argues that governments implement these models because they believe they will deliver innovation, choice and improved student outcomes, but in practice they deepen inequality (Ronnberg 2016; DeBray, Scott, Lubienski & Jabbar 2014).

The sub-theme of concerns about public school funding arose in multiple places across the broader set of open responses. School funding has always been a contentious issue in Australia, and it is unsurprising that many responses referenced this issue. A significant number of responses argued that current funding models are inequitable for public schools and the Gonski funding model needs to be actioned for there to be any hope of rectifying this situation. Interestingly, some responses suggested that many people within the “education community ...believe that governments are now intending to fund public systems so poorly that parents

will place their children in private schools and public schools will be residual institutions for the poor”. This critique of the “user pays mentality” and the resultant “inequality for students” was widespread, and sat in opposition to what most understood as the rationale for public education: “Education is a public right - not a money making scheme for private business. An adequately resourced and run Public education system contributes more to society than privately run schools and providers who are after \$\$\$ or elitism”.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers and school leaders in Australian public schools have a diverse range of opinions regarding the commercialisation of schooling. Many school leaders believe they need to engage with commercial providers to counteract a withdrawal of state funding and support services. This has resulted in shifting some costs of commercial goods and services to parents and, in some cases, seeking financial support from corporate and philanthropic actors. In a 2010 survey of Australian primary school principals, Cranston, Mulford, Keating and Reid (2010) found that there had been ‘a major shift away from public purposes of education to those more aligned with private purposes’ (p. 533). Cranston et al. described the tensions that primary school principals were experiencing as they negotiated between their commitments to the public purposes of education and the demand to make schools more efficient providers of private goods (e.g. credentials) to individuals. Our survey reported here suggests that these tensions are becoming more acute and, in some cases, are creating divides within schools as classroom teachers consider principals who must manage schools as businesses to be undermining the public purposes of schooling.

Many teachers and school leaders do see the need for some degree of commercial support and want the autonomy to choose commercial products and services that support their work and the

management of their schools. However, despite some perceived benefits, respondents also described many negative effects and concerns about the long-term implications of this trend. For example, concerns were expressed about the re-positioning of assessment as the cornerstone of schooling, creating new markets for test-driven products and the associated risk of teacher deprofessionalisation when autonomy to decide what and how to teach is diminished. There is also concern that private providers and products may increasingly replace publicly-employed teachers (first in learning areas like music and HPE, but perhaps over the longer term through software that provides personalised learning for students).

Growing commercialisation in Australian public schools clearly requires an ethical debate that schools, education professionals, policy makers and interested publics are yet to have. This debate concerns the points at which commercial activity in school undermines the basic purposes of public schooling, such as the free, universal and secular provision of education to all (Reid 2017). One pressing ethical issue is the exacerbation of uneven access to resources within systems as a result of cost-shifting to parents, which is a trend that has been present for decades but is continuing to intensify (Meadmore 2001). Another issue is the importation of business logics into public institutions, or what Ball and Youdell (2008) describe as endogenous privatisation, as the nexus between public and private organisations is increasingly blurred. Increasing engagement with commercial providers, due to standardisation, technological advances and policies that drive marketization, decentralisation and school autonomy, must be balanced against concerns that commercialisation can threaten the basic purposes of public schooling, and the provision of education as a public rather than positional good, if it is not carefully regulated. As one respondent asserted, regardless of the benefits, “it should never be an option to privatise a basic human right!”

Clearly, some aspects of commercialisation are necessary and useful in schools. However, respondents evidenced a concern about the impact of commercialisation. This speaks to the



complex forces at play in schooling and how they are perceived by the survey participants. A point for hope, perhaps, is that the vast majority of participants expressed a deep affiliation with the ideal of public schooling as an ethical good, and concern about how to sustain this ideal in the future.

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